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### **‘All cities are equal, but some are more equal than others’**

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**“All cities are equal, but some are more equal than others”.**

## **Policy mobility and asymmetric relations in inter-urban networks for sustainability**

Knowledge sharing is deemed an important function of transnational municipal networks. However, in the literature on these organisations, a critical discussion of the implications of this process is scant. This article unpacks the mechanisms regulating learning and examines the cognitive and relational dynamics of knowledge exchange within socio-ecological urban networks. By analysing the experience of a small group of European post-industrial second cities in socio-ecological urban networks, this article shows that network members exchange ideas and practices to tackle urban regeneration issues. The data suggest that, despite touted as a peer-to-peer practice, knowledge sharing reinforces asymmetrical relationships among network members, enabling the “soft domination” of more advanced cities over less successful ones.

**Keywords:** transnational municipalism; urban policy mobilities; local governments; urban sustainability; Europe.

### **Introduction**

A large corpus of research in political geography, public administration and political science has investigated the process of policy learning and policy mobility among local governments (see inter alia, Bulkeley, 2006; Kennedy, 2016; McCann, 2011; McCann et Ward, 2013; Peck et Theodore, 2010; Temenos, and McCann, 2012). Among these, policy

learning occurring in networks of municipalities, often referred as transnational municipal networks (see the work of Bulkeley and Bulkeley and colleagues), has also drawn some scholarly attention, in particular to the process of exchange of knowledge, experiences, best practices and information (see for instance, Bulkeley et al., 2003; Kübler and Piliutyte, 2007; Lee and Meene, 2012; Le Galès, 2002). However, in the scholarship on transnational municipal networks, beyond the recognition of these organisations as spaces where cities exchange knowledge and learn from their peers, there is little critical discussion about policy learning among member-cities and its implications. Extant literature on the topic under study has provided limited empirical evidence on the cognitive and relational aspects of knowledge exchange and policy learning, glossing over the power dynamics among the agents involved in these processes. In the attempt to enrich this thread of research, the study here reported analyses the policy learning process occurring among European cities engaged in inter-urban networks for sustainability –named socio-ecological urban networks (SEUNs) (Mocca, 2017a, 2017b) - a field characterised by intense networking among municipalities (Labaeve and Sauer, 2013), by paying attention to the inter-agent relations. SEUNs are inter-urban organisations promoting urban sustainability, broadly understood in its environmental, social and economic dimensions, such as Eurocities, Energy Cities and ICLEI (Mocca, 2017a). Therefore, this article proposes to answer two main questions: *what type of knowledge is exchanged in SEUNs?* And *how does the learning process work in these networks?* In order to provide a fine-grained analysis, this latter question can be broken down in two sub-questions: *which cities learn?* And *which ones teach?*

To address these questions, the type of knowledge shared and the role played by the agents involved in the learning process will be examined. For this purpose, this article engages with the transnational municipalism and the policy mobility literatures and provides evidence through a qualitative analysis of a pool of European post-industrial second cities -

Birmingham, Cremona, Hamburg, Lille, Malmö, Manchester and Torino - engaged in SEUNs based in Europe. The empirical analysis helped to tease out the learning process within SEUNs and to map the “municipal connections” (Saunier, 2002) engendered by policy learning.

The findings reveal that, SEUNs are arenas where to share and learn praxes on urban regeneration. Further, the data indicate that the exchange of policy knowledge in such networks is not equal and reciprocal, but is dominated by successful cities, which set the policy trends that other cities seek to emulate. As a result, the elevation of some cities to the status of urban models confers them a certain political pre-eminence within networks. Finally, the data suggest that the process of policy learning reinforces asymmetrical relationships among network members, enabling the “soft domination” of the most advanced cities over the least successful ones. Since policy learning in transnational municipal networks is not regulated by coercion, such domination can be thought as the hegemony of some policy models and discourses over others.

The article begins with a discussion of the transnational municipalism and the policy mobility literatures to set out the theoretical framework, followed by the presentation of the method and the findings. The discussion of the findings and concluding remarks are provided in the final section.

### **Transnational municipalism and policy mobility**

To approach theoretically the questions laid out above, this article, taking the cue from Clarke (2012a, 2012b), draws on insights from the transnational municipalism literature and the contributions on policy mobilities. While the first enables an examination of the

structure, functions and activities of transnational municipal networks, the latter lends theoretical support to a critical analysis of policy learning processes among municipalities engaged at international level. These two literatures are strongly intertwined, in that transnational municipalism facilitates policy mobility (Clarke, 2009; Saunier, 2002).

To unravel the cognitive and relational dynamics playing out in SEUNs, it is necessary to distinguish the different learning processes occurring in inter-municipal networks: knowledge sharing, policy learning and policy transfer. These three processes are outlined in the following sub-section.

### *SEUNs and peer learning*

As a sizeable number of studies suggests<sup>1</sup>, knowledge sharing is an integral part of city networking. Information is used with different purposes within networks, such as exerting political influence onto nation-states, or aimed at “norm diffusion, consensus building or changing practice” (Andonova et al., 2009, pp.63-64).

A second process occurring in inter-urban networks is policy learning. This is determined by changes in beliefs or attitudes engendered by previous knowledge and the willingness to achieve specific goals (Sabatier, 1988). Some authors argue that the knowledge exchanged in inter-urban networks does not automatically lead to policy learning (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004). Nonetheless, by sharing knowledge about a common concern, local policy-makers inevitably learn from each other’s experience. If understood as “the general increase in knowledge about policies” (Bennett and Howlett, 1992, pp.288–289), knowledge exchange, which in transnational municipal networks is mainly about policies and practices,

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<sup>1</sup> Andonova *et al.* (2009); Bulkeley and Betsill (2003); Bulkeley *et al.* (2003); Bulkeley and Newell (2010); Kern (2009); Keiner and Kim (2007); Kern and Bulkeley (2009); Le Galès (2002); Leitner and Sheppard (1999); Marshall (2005); Ward and Williams (1997).

then fosters policy learning. Furthermore, in established SEUNs, member-cities tend to develop durable and personal connections (Mocca, 2017b), thus making policy circulation and, possibly, policy transfer - or “policy mobility”, as defined by some authors (Clarke, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; McCann, 2011, 2013; McCann and Ward, 2013) - more likely to occur. Policy transfer takes place whenever

“knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place” (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, p.344).

It is argued that transnational municipal networks are primarily agents of “policy innovation and influence” and “policy learning”, while only marginally fostering policy transfer (Bulkeley et al., 2003, p.248). This claim may hold true if policy transfer is thought as a copy-and-paste process, whereby a policy solution in one city is replicated as it is in another. However, in addition to “copying” a model, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p.351) identify other modalities of policy transfer, namely “emulation”, “hybridization” and “synthesis” – which entails blending different experiences to create innovative solutions - and “inspiration”. In this respect, the policy mobilities literature assumes that policies are not transferred tout court, but adjusted “on the move” (McCann, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010). Hence, imported policies are not reproduced as they were originally formulated, but they are shaped by institutional and political practices, norms and ideas of the hosting municipality (McCann, 2011). McCann and Ward (2013, p.8) describe this adaptive process as an “assemblage” of “fixed and mobile pieces of expertise, regulation, institutional capacities [...] from close by and far away”. Such “pieces” travelling within policy circles include not only “policy goals, concepts, [...] ideas”, “program structure, design, and techniques”, but also “policy labels” (Mossberger, 2000 in Wolman and Page, 2002, p.480) –

i.e. tags defining policies based on broad concepts (Wolman and Page, 2002, p.480).

Therefore, discourses to frame policies and “‘hot’ policy ideas” (McCann, 2011, p.109) also travel across municipalities. A significant example of a mobile discourse is urban sustainability. Political discourses are replete with references to sustainability, which has become the ultimate objective that policy-makers of different political colours aim to achieve. Therefore, the political interest for urban “sustainability fixes” responds to the need of coupling environmental quality with economic growth (Temenos and McCann, 2012).

The idea of policy “assemblage” (McCann and Ward, 2013) suggests a pick-and-mix policy-making style that results in innovative policy solutions, thus averting the prospect of policy convergence. Nonetheless, some policy models or cities are cited more often as good examples - as McCann (2011) observes. In more detail, exemplar policies or cities are “relationally produced”, inasmuch as they acquire the status of models only if they are recognised as such by external “disciples and admirers” (McCann, 2013, p.10). Although the achievement of the model city status requires political commitment, concrete policy interventions and financial investments, the “exceptionalism” of some urban models is also discursively constructed through the use of “rhetorical devices”, such as “superlatives” and “firsts” (Beauregard, 2003, p.184), urban “stereotypes, archetypes and prototypes” (Brenner, 2003) and “inter-referencing” mechanisms (Ong, 2011). Saunier (2002, p.520) points out that transnational municipalism provides cities with examples of policy innovations to be used as “a rhetorical armoury” in discourses to change or improve urban conditions. Furthermore, the author observes that, historically, municipal examples were implemented through various processes, including “imitation, reappropriation or adaptation” (Saunier, 2002, p.519). In particular, the imitation of examples that worked elsewhere is a significant mechanism of policy mobility. Emulation is guided by the “desire for conformity” of those governments that “do not want to be left behind”, or aimed at obtaining “credibility” at international level -

what Meseguer (2005, p.73) defines as “symbolic imitation” (Happaerts and Van den Brande, 2011, p.531). Emulation can also constitute a policy-making strategy for those localities with few policy options available and unclear objectives (Chien, 2008). In the specific case of inter-urban networks for sustainability, the engagement in such organisations may provide member-cities with the opportunity to imitate or be inspired by “travelling ecomodels” (Blok, 2012, p.2333). Hence, we would expect that in SEUNs, cities recognised as sustainability exemplars dominate the policy learning process.

### *Policy circulation: a peer-to-peer practice?*

Through the praise of specific urban interventions, policy circulation engenders “an uneven landscape of ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ cities” (McCann, 2013, p.10), primarily produced by municipalities’ resource availability (McCann, 2011). More precisely, the external activity, or the “‘extrospective’ orientation”, of “consumers of policy boosterism” is driven by public spending cuts and the need to find effective policy solutions (McCann, 2013, p.9). Such lopsided exchange of policy knowledge may engender what Robinson (2006) defines as “imitative urbanism”, whereby policies travel unevenly from the top to the bottom of urban hierarchies (Clarke, 2012a). As a result, policy mobilities may bring about “new forms of uneven spatial development” (Peck and Theodore, 2010, p.170). Following this line of reasoning, it can be argued that the exchange of knowledge and best practices within SEUNs conceals asymmetric inter-member relationships. Although sounding like a truism, the act of learning hinges on an imbalanced relationship between the teacher – i.e. the holder of the knowledge - and the learner, which needs that type of knowledge. The fact that knowledge exchange is an important motivation for cities to engage in transnational municipal networks (Kübler and Piliutyte, 2007; Mocca, 2017b) suggests that a certain kind of knowledge about



urban policy and practices can only be retrieved in networks, or it can be retrieved in another way (for instance, through research conducted by local government staff in each city), but at a higher cost. As a result, the possession of a sought-after policy knowledge confers a certain supremacy to the teacher, while putting the learner in a subordinated position. It may be counter-argued that the roles of “borrowers” and “learners” are not fixed, but interchangeable (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000, p.10). However, as Stone (2004, p.549) observes, learning is “uneven and imperfect” in policy networks, insofar as “[c]ertain actors may have a greater capacity for learning whereas others may adopt lessons for symbolic purposes or as a strategic device to secure political support rather than as a result of improved understanding”.

Being spaces for knowledge exchange as well as vectors of policy mobilities, inter-municipal networks may reinforce such uneven relations among members. Empirical evidence has shown that policy learning in transnational municipal networks is more likely to occur when cities have a common language and, at least in Europe and North America, are located in the same region, suggesting that the linkages among network members are regulated by the “homophily principle”, in that connections are more likely to develop between agents sharing similar characteristics (Lee and Meene, 2012). Likewise, Gerber et al. (2013) demonstrated that cities with a similar political and social context are more likely to cooperate in a network and support common policies. The flip side of homophily is that it may also lead to the marginalisation of those members with different characteristics. In this respect, Bouteliger (2013) found that cities from the Global North tend to exert more influence over transnational municipal networks’ actions and goals than their counterparts in the Global South. On a more critical stand, Leitner and Sheppard (2002, p.512) note that “unequal power relations” are likely to develop within networks: the different economic background of cities affects their capacity to negotiate, so that the advantages of network involvement are not equally spread among members at the expenses of deprived localities.

Even further, the authors claim that, while described as “non-hierarchical”, “flexible”, “self-organising” and “collaborative”, networks “exhibit tendencies towards hierarchy, inequality, imitation, and exclusion” (Leitner and Sheppard, 2002, p.514).

Such imbalances within networks are also evident in the different patterns of sub-national mobilisation, with some localities assuming a “pro-active” role, while others tend to be “reactive” (Goldsmith, 1993, p.693). Similarly, Kern and Alber (2008, p.14) report the presence of “pioneers and laggards” in inter-urban networks, whose differences are addressed “by setting tiered standards that attract members with differing levels of performance and ambition”. Kern and Bulkeley (2009, pp.326, 329) describe three ‘green’ inter-urban networks – namely, Climate Alliance, Cities for Climate Protection and Energie-Cités - as “networks of pioneers for pioneers”, which are those cities that have been actively engaged in networks since their outset. Furthermore, Keiner and Kim (2007, p.1393) distinguish the presence in inter-urban networks for sustainability of a “giving end”, i.e. “the forerunner cities” that have a leading role, and a “receiving end”, which exploits what networks offer.

The discussion laid out above suggests that inter-urban networks facilitate the exchange of practical information and discourses. At the same time, the learning process appears to be led by exemplary cities. Drawing on these premises, the following sections present and discuss the findings of a multiple case study analysis involving seven European SEUN members.

## **Method**

To understand what type of knowledge is exchanged among SEUN-members and how the learning process works in SEUNs, a small-N qualitative analysis was performed on a pool of seven European cities engaged in SEUNs: Birmingham, Cremona, Hamburg, Lille,

Malmö, Manchester and Torino. This methodological approach was adopted as it enables to undertake an intense cross-case analysis to shed light on the recurrent attitudes, relations and causal factors underlying the phenomenon under study.

The case selection process relied on the data and findings of a research on the same subject, which quantitatively explored the urban-level factors determining SEUN membership<sup>2 3</sup> (Mocca. 2017a). Using as selection criteria the dependent variables found as statistically significant by the abovementioned study, the sample for the qualitative study included: post-industrial (or “modern”) cities; cities mainly ruled by centre-left or left-wing governments in the timespan 1985-2013<sup>4</sup>; cities endowed of some administrative competencies (such as provinces or regional capitals) or territorial influence and “cooperative” cities, i.e. members at least of a non-sustainability network<sup>5</sup> (Mocca. 2017a).

Once the small-N sample of cases was drawn, semi-structured interviews were conducted. For this aim, fifteen respondents, comprising both elected and non-elected officials in charge of European and/or International Relations or environmental policy that were engaged in SEUNs<sup>6</sup>, were recruited (Figure 1). The data collection techniques employed included mainly semi-structured in person interviews, replaced by telephone interviews or questionnaires when the respondents could not be interviewed face-to-face<sup>7 8</sup>. The questions asked during the interviews, both face-to-face and telephonic, were reproduced as open-ended questions in the questionnaire, to ensure that the different data collection techniques

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<sup>2</sup> The networks taken into account were mainly based in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> SEUN membership is computed as a continuous variable.

<sup>4</sup> The timespan hove the cited study covers the period in which the majority of inter-urban networks were set up.

<sup>5</sup> For further information about the case selection process see Mocca (2017b).

<sup>6</sup> The Respondent 3 from Lille claimed to have participated more in international rather than European networks. Another participant, Respondent 3 from Manchester, was included in the study as an “informant”: despite not being engaged in SEUNs, this participant had expert knowledge of the subject (Mocca, 2017b, p.9).

<sup>7</sup> Questionnaires were administrated to the respondents from Cremona and Hamburg and to the Respondent 2 from Torino.

<sup>8</sup> The data collection phase began in November 2013 and was completed in March 2014

would have generated consistent answers. It should be acknowledged that the use of the questionnaire hindered the possibility to further investigate the respondents' answers, for instant by prompting them or by asking follow-up questions. As a result, the answers collected with questionnaires, while still useful to the analysis, are less articulate than those obtained through the interviews.

The interview transcripts and the questionnaires were then examined by undertaking a thematic analysis, aimed at capturing the policy learning dynamics occurring within SEUNs. The data were grouped in three main thematic clusters reflecting the research questions: 1) the knowledge, experience and information shared among SEUN-members, paying particular attention to the sustainability dimension; 2) the modes of learning occurring among the members and 3) the inter-city relations emerging in the learning process. The data were analysed separately for each respondent. However, city-level aggregate data were employed to examine the spatial implications of the learning dynamics. In the next section, the findings of the small-N analysis are presented<sup>9</sup>.

[Figure 1 here]

## **Findings**

The analysis highlighted three main aspects of policy learning within SEUNs. First, the conceptualisation of the networks as “learning environment[s]” (Mocca, 2017b, p.10), where members can learn practices implemented in other European cities, especially in the realm of urban regeneration. Second, the possibility to emulate exemplary cities, which have distinguished themselves for their innovative urban policies. Third, the unevenness of the

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<sup>9</sup> For an extensive account of the methodology see Mocca (2017a, 2017b).

learning process, driven by cutting-edge cities. In the following sections, these themes are examined.

### **The networks as “learning environments”**

The participants stressed how SEUN membership enabled them to pool knowledge, solutions and experiences with peers from other cities. The network is thus conceived as a “learning environment”, that is an arena where knowledge about members’ approaches, instruments and interventions are shared (Mocca 2017b, p.10) and where members can easily find a repertoire of solutions for their problems, as stated by some Respondents.

Being exposed to other cities’ experiences, SEUN members are inspired to implement innovative local policies. In this respect, emblematic is the statement made by the Respondent 3 from Lille, for whom within networks “you get a lot of new ideas that you would not get if you do not participate and you do not make the mistakes you would make”. Further, the network provides the information and the stimulus to experiment with local policy-making, or for some, simply to “upgrade” and improve policies (Respondent 1 from Malmö), or to get further experience (Respondent from Hamburg). In other words, the exchange of ideas through the networks results in an innovation push.

As some participants suggested, policy innovation can be described as a two-way flow, whereby there is an “incremental continuum between innovation and learning” (Respondent 1 from Torino): the particular experience of each city feeds into the process of policy diffusion generating further policy innovation. For instance, the Respondent 1 from Torino argued that, in the field of neighbourhood regeneration, intercultural and integration

policies, Torino has been considered as one of the most innovative European cities. This boils down to the fact that on these issues the council

“ha[s] learnt and tried to implement policies producing innovation. We have not done this by ourselves [...]; we have tried, through the work with other cities, to implement local actions taking into account approaches developed by others. This is the most meaningful value of the participation in networks: you get to see things from a different perspective, but you have to adapt the different experiences to the local level” (Respondent 1 from Torino).

Similarly, the Respondent 4 from Manchester suggested that the exchange of ideas with other cities informed rather than totally shaped the policies of the local authority. In the same vein, for the Respondent from Hamburg, regional or local policy is the result of adapting international experience to regional/local demands. These statements suggest that the policy solutions shared within SEUNs are not slavishly copied, but are adjusted to the local context. Knowledge exchange is thus about finding “inspiration”, as the Respondent 1 from Malmö observed. The inspirational scope of SEUNs was also highlighted by the Respondent 1 from Birmingham, who argued that the international engagement of cities

“is about being inspired by ideas, [...] new ways of thinking of a problem or an issue and about taking aspects of a policy or project and using that in project development in your own city, sensitive to national legal frameworks and maybe how you work with local partners.”

As the evidence suggests, knowledge exchange results in policy learning, in that network members have the opportunity to get acquainted with the policies and initiatives implemented by other cities. However, as the findings indicate, the transferability of the best

examples should not be overestimated: as some Respondents stated, policy transfer may not be feasible due to local problems – especially of financial nature. In more detail, as highlighted by the Respondent 1 from Lille, the exchange of ideas does not necessarily lead to their translation into policies, since local authorities might lack the means to implement those ideas. Likewise, the Respondent from Cremona argued that the networks give the opportunity to learn from other cities innovative praxes, although, for various reasons<sup>10</sup>, these are not easily applied at local level.

Given the focus on urban sustainability of the networks included in this study, in the next section policy learning in this field will be discussed.

### *Learning urban sustainability*

The evidence indicates that the process of policy learning occurring within SEUNs supports network members' endeavour to regenerate their cities. This issue is particularly important for the cities analysed, as they experienced the problems associated to deindustrialisation, including the reuse of industrial areas, unemployment and the economic restructuring<sup>11</sup>. To deal with the upshots of the post-industrial transition, cities search for inspiration on how to redevelop their localities and SEUNs have been an important source of information in this regard. As the Respondent 2 from Birmingham stated, network engagement “is [...] about a wider regeneration agenda. And learning from partner cities is crucial to that”. The Respondent 1 from Manchester, talking about Eurocities, said that it “is a great network for learning from other cities and sharing what you have, your areas of

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<sup>10</sup> The respondent did not indicate for what reasons the practices learnt from other cities are then not developed by the local government.

<sup>11</sup> See on this point also Mocca, (2017a).

specialty. For example, in the 1990s we learnt a lot from other cities about regeneration and how to turn your city around.” In the same vein, the Respondent 1 from Torino argued that the city’s experience on urban regeneration has been used as an example of good practice by other Italian cities and to some extent, by some European peers, especially by cities in the Southern area of the Continent.

The relatively recent interest of local governments in urban sustainability may be – at least partly- explained by local authorities’ necessity to undertake urban regeneration. To this end, the idea of urban sustainability serves as a blueprint for regenerating cities: the promise of economic growth coupled with social fairness and low environmental impact aptly works as an ethical frame to guide regeneration plans. The discourse behind the idea of sustainable development assumes different connotations. Most of the respondents mentioned the need to change the current economic model, but the extent of such change varies. A more radical vision emerged in interviews with two respondents from Lille (Respondents 1 and 3), for whom sustainable development entailed the transition towards an alternative economic and social model. The two British cities displayed a more practical and less idealistic perspective: the respondents from both cities reckoned the need to change the approach to the economy, but in a more eco-compatible way. Significant was the view expressed by the Respondent 2 from Birmingham, who observed how, while “the limit to growth” report identified the economic growth as a disaster,

“sustainable development was a [...] very successful way of short-circuiting that kind of quite negative debate between growth on the one side and the environment on the other, and demonstrated that was possible to bring the two things together”.



According to the Respondent 4 from Manchester, sustainable economic growth is a goal that, although involving physical development, it is also about changing and adapting the existing situation, “making a more attractive and better city for the uses people want today”. Malmö stood in an intermediate position, supporting the need to change lifestyle, while creating a more environmental-friendly economy. In this respect, the Respondent 2 from Malmö argued that:

“sustainable city development means that you need to do more than business as usual. [...] You need to be innovative and find new solutions and ideas and so on. So, the networks have quite a lot, because you get lot of contacts with other cities.”

Similarly, the Respondent 1 from Torino expressed the opinion that, for the city, sustainable urban development is about increasing the urban quality, that is quality of the public spaces, sustainable mobility, improvement of environmental conditions, and social sustainability, avoiding that “multi-speed cities” co-exist within the urban fabric.

The respondents’ answers revealed how their personal visions underlie their conceptualisation of urban sustainable development. For this reasons, the research participants were asked whether they considered sustainable development as a political concept – i.e. encompassing specific value-sets and worldviews. As most of the respondents stated, sustainable development is indeed a political concept, since it proposes significant changes at urban and individual level. Furthermore, as the Respondent 3 from Manchester observed, whereas sustainable development is a concept sweeping across the whole political spectrum, there might be a left- and right-wing reading. For instance, the Respondent 2 from Birmingham noted that the left may emphasise the social justice agenda, while the right may pay more attention to the economic aspects. Additionally, according to the Respondent 1 from Birmingham, different parties manifest a different degree of interest on sustainable

development, for example introducing a cabinet member working on sustainability matters. By way of contrast, the Respondent 2 from Malmö and the Respondent 2 from Manchester argued that cities committed to sustainability are governed by councils of various political leaning. Nonetheless, the Respondent 2 from Malmö conceded that these may have a “different way of implementing” sustainable development.

Given the wide engagement of European cities in SEUNs, the importance of sustainable development for municipal administrations was investigated and a set of reasons for local governments’ interest in sustainable development emerged from the analysis. Principally, the drawbacks of the de-industrialisation process. For most of the participants, the interest of cities in sustainability was motivated by the willingness to recover from the problems engendered by deindustrialisation, such as unemployment, soil and air pollution, and economic instability. Similarly, for the Respondent from Cremona, sustainable development addresses urban environmental problems affecting industrialised cities. According to the Respondent 1 from Lille, sustainable development offers opportunities for economic recovery. Additionally, for some respondents, sustainable development is about quality of life for citizens: this means improvements in liveability and attractiveness of cities. However, the Respondent 2 from Malmö argued that, to do so, it is necessary to improve environmental quality, the participation of citizens and the economic situation, the latter being “part of daily life”, which allows people to “live and thrive”. Improvements in quality of life may have a two-fold advantage: by making cities liveable and healthy places, one meets the sustainability agenda; at the same time, cities present “an extremely attractive inward investment case”, as the Respondent 2 from Birmingham pointed out. For some participants, sustainable development is important in that it couples economic growth with environmental and social concerns, and the future development of cities should be built within the sustainability framework.

The sustainability discourse is thus instrumental to policy innovation: the challenge posed by sustainability implies the development of innovative solutions to achieve economic growth, while ensuring at the same time social equality and environmental quality. Sustainable mobility plans, measures to reduce carbon emissions, natural capital management, green procurement etc. represent important policy instruments that local authorities have been increasingly using in their territories. Therefore, the importance of sustainable development for cities is that it can be used as a guiding principle to undertake urban regeneration. In this sense, policy learning in the realm of sustainability is the vector of urban restructuring. Since urban regeneration is undertaken at different speeds, front-runner cities tend to lead the learning process, as will be discussed in the next section.

### **The “virtue of imitating”**

While mutually influencing each other, some SEUN members appear to carry more clout than others. The overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that specific projects, patterns of urban regeneration or governance models implemented in their cities have been regarded with interest by other European counterparts. Networks offer what the Respondent 2 from Lille defined as “the virtue of imitating” – i.e. the possibility of emulating other cities (Mocca, 2017b, p.10). At the same time, member-cities strive to become themselves successful examples of urban renewal. The data indicate that members look up at those fellow cities that have effectively solved local problems, especially those caused by de-industrialisation. As the Respondent 1 from Manchester observed, cities are inspired from those peers they “admire” and “can learn from”. The latter are those cities that distinguished themselves by following innovative development trajectories and thus, become the “trend-

setters”. By way of contrast, those cities where the transformation is still *in fieri* become the “followers”, aspiring to achieve the objective of urban regeneration.

As the Respondent 2 from Lille suggested, gathering information about successful examples implemented in other cities provide the legitimacy to reinforce their objectives in their cities. More precisely, the “foreign” examples are used by individual network members as reference cases to show to their local government that a specific policy can be implemented. However, the selection of the examples has to be carefully done: the “model-city” has to be a successful example of policy implementation, but - as the Respondent 2 from Lille argued - it cannot be culturally too distant, otherwise, it might be met with resistance from the colleagues in the council and from national policy-makers, which may consider the example “too forward”; therefore, it is necessary to provide both national and international examples.

In most of the interviews, it emerged that respondents look at those cities with which they share significant similarities, especially a common economic background characterised by the post-industrial transition. For example, the Respondent 2 from Birmingham observed that, for Birmingham, the post-industrial crisis in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century played a significant role in the city’s engagement in Eurocities, making the city realise that it was necessary “to engage with other cities that [were] experiencing similar problems”. Therefore, the need to reinvent the urban identity in a period when traditional industries were dismantled pushed cities to develop inter-urban linkages. Similarly, the Respondent 1 from Manchester stated that Manchester was a very different city in the 1980s and 1990s, when industrialisation had come to a standstill. For this Respondent, the problem was how to transform the city and “how to find a new vision” for it. To this end, Manchester “learnt a lot from cities like Barcelona [and] Lyon at that time” (Respondent 1 from Manchester). It follows that cities

learn from those places with which they have a “commonality” (Respondent 2 from Birmingham). In this respect, the Respondent 2 from Birmingham argued that “there’s massive scope there for information exchange, for learning from each other, and becoming stronger because of that knowledge of what’s going on in comparable places”. Such “comparability aspect” was also indicated by the Respondent 2 from Malmö, who stated that, by comparing each other, network members can understand their strong points and flaws.

The emphasis placed by some participants on the similarities with other European cities suggests that nationality is not perceived as a discriminatory factor. Actually, the “comparable places” are often located outside the national boundaries. Emblematic is the opinion of the Respondent 2 from Birmingham, for whom, underpinning the city’s engagement in European networks, there was “the recognition that Birmingham has lot more in common with Frankfurt and Lyon than it has in common with Cornwall. So, you needed that European perspective”. Likewise, the Respondent 1 from Torino stated that, for what concerns the issue of urban sustainability and reconversion of de-industrialised land, the city has “more commonalities with the German cities in the Ruhr region or with the former textile manufacturing centres in the North of England than with Siena<sup>12</sup>, for example”. Additionally, the Respondent 4 from Manchester claimed that “[Manchester] probably ha[s] much more in common as a lot of European cities than just those in the UK”.

The emulative dynamic between trend-setters and followers raises a question about the parts involved in the learning process: *which cities learn and which ones teach?* In what follows, the learning process is examined to answer this question.

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<sup>12</sup> City in Italy.

### **The unevenness of the learning process**

Mostly unprompted, the respondents<sup>13</sup> – except for those from Cremona and Hamburg - indicated some cities or specific European geographical regions - both included and not included in the study – as comparable places or as successful examples in some sectors of urban policy (e.g. sustainable mobility, employment policy, knowledge society etc.). These cities, which represent the urban models at which the respondents look, are mainly concentrated in the Northern-continental Europe, with some centres in South-West Europe. Specifically, most of the participants named at least one German city (or region) that has somehow influenced them, followed by French cities, particularly Lyon, and former industrial English cities. Moreover, the Respondents indicated as influential examples some Northern European cities (Helsinki and Tampere in Finland; Stockholm and Malmö in Sweden) and a few cities in Southern Europe, particularly in Spain, such as Barcelona, Figueres and Victoria Gasteiz. It can be noted that no cities in the member-states of the former Eastern bloc and only a few in the Southern European region were mentioned. This may suggest how northern and continental metropolitan areas are regarded as the leaders in the process of post-industrial urban regeneration and are significantly influencing the European urban development model (Figure 2). On closer examination, these findings hint at the existence of a cluster of European cities that set the trends in urban policy followed by other local authorities.

[Figure 2 here]

Although member-cities look up at inspirational urban examples, it cannot be concluded that the trajectory of European urban development will end up producing homogeneous cities. As the Respondent 1 from Manchester argued: “there are common

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<sup>13</sup> The data were aggregated for each city to examine the spatial implications of policy learning.

themes across the cities, but we're all individual in how we approach them". Therefore, SEUN members search for new ideas to solve specific problems in their localities; but the transfer of policies or initiatives from one city to another is neither simple nor immediate. Ultimately, it is necessary to adapt one policy solution to the specific social, economic and cultural characteristics of the urban context.

## **Discussion**

Policy learning in SEUNs has been examined in the previous sections through a qualitative analysis focusing on the experience of a pool of SEUN members. The findings suggest that SEUNs facilitate the circulation of specific ideas, approaches and practices among members. In particular, the findings indicate that the exchange of information and knowledge among member-cities results in policy learning. As exemplified in Figure 3 below, there are two possible outcomes of policy learning. The first one is policy upgrade, which indicates a situation where an existing policy or measure is improved as a result of policy learning. Policy upgrade occurs where a given policy is already in place, but, thanks to the exchange of information and the learning of innovative examples, there is a general improvement. The second possible outcome is policy emulation, whereby a policy or a specific measure developed in one place is imitated in another. However, the imitation of a policy solution should not be intended as its mere reproduction in another city, but a process requiring the transformation and adaption - or deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Clarke, 2012b) - of the imported policy to the specificities of the hosting urban context.

As the data show, knowledge exchange and the consequential policy learning do not always end up with the migration of policy solutions. Policy learning may simply improve

existing policies or may not even produce any effects. This occurs when a local authority does not have the resources to implement the transferred idea, or when local actors engaged in networks fail to persuade their council to import a policy solution. The migration of ideas or solutions may ultimately yield policy innovation, whenever the imported knowledge feeds in a new policy. As the evidence suggests, local policy innovation is the result of incremental changes, rather than of sudden radical transformations. The tenet of policy mobility literature, for which “policies change as they move” (Clarke, 2012b, p.31), seems to regulate the policy learning outcomes of SEUN engagement.

[Figure 3 here]

As a result of knowledge and information exchange, cities have the opportunity to know how other cities have dealt with common urban issues. The network-members that have solved a vexing socio-economic or environmental problem or have improved some aspects of the urban governance, then become examples to reproduce in other cities. As also emerged elsewhere, network members use the experience of other cities as a reference case to support policy changes at local level (Mocca, 2017b). Similarly, Betsill and Bulkeley (2004, p.486) found that the Climate Change Protection programme provided municipalities with “legitimacy and authority”. As Kennedy (2016) observes, referring to international good urban examples is a persuasive tactics to make the case for a specific policy.

The need for municipalities to find new ideas to improve the local economic performance as well as the social and environmental situation in their territories responds to the urban regeneration objectives of economic restructuring, physical requalification and social renewal. In this sense, European urban networking fits into a wider plan to boost local development (Mocca, 2017a). This claim is supported by Ewen’s historical analysis of Birmingham’s international engagement (2008, p.103), where it is argued that “municipalities



continued to play the leading role in forging new policy networks in regenerating cities, through a process of transnational municipalism”. What is more, urban regeneration is important for local political elites in that any improvement in terms of quality of life may result in an electoral payoff.

The findings indicate that SEUN engagement leads to two phenomena: comparability and emulation. On the one hand, network members compare themselves with each other, especially with those cities sharing a common economic background and similar urban development objectives; in so doing, they can recognise their successes and pinpoint areas of improvement. On the other hand, member-cities find inspiration from trend-setters, which furnish policy models to be adapted to various local contexts. A striking finding was that the majority of the trend-setters indicated by the respondents are mainly located in Northern-continental Europe. Interestingly, the map illustrated in Figure 2 above suggests that the geographical location of the influential cities broadly recalls the area identified by Brunet in 1989 as the European backbone (“dorsale”), famously named “blue banana”, which stretches from Northern England to Northern Italy. As Metaxas and Tsavdaridou (2013, p.16) state, this area “was different from the rest of the European locations based on demographic, economic level as well as in a cultural and in infrastructure level”. In the late 1980s-early 1990s, the cities in the central area had an economic advantage due to the development of advanced production, while marginal cities, such as “Dublin, Lisbon, Seville, Palermo, Cagliari, Athens and Thessaloniki”, did not have these resources at their disposal (Hall, 1992; cited in Lever, 1993, p.936).

To some extent, the findings indicate a parallelism between the relations among network members and the European urban economic geography. Although the small sample cannot allow for a broad generalisation, the data suggest that the relationships among network

members reproduce the long-lasting pattern of the European urban development: the poles of economic growth – located in the core of continental Europe with few centres in the North and South-West – seem to assume the role of trend-setters. The argument about this overlapping between inter-member relations and urban development paths is also reinforced by the silence of the respondents about Eastern European cities. In effect, no cities from Eastern European countries were indicated by the interviewees, either as noteworthy examples of urban policies, or as project partners with which they have shared experience and information. This finding can be partly explained by the recent interests of Eastern European local authorities in networks. While ten years ago Keiner and Kim (2007) found that most of the big cities in Eastern Europe were not members of any transnational networks for sustainable development, to date the presence of several Eastern European cities - not only capitals - in SEUNs is increasing<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the data show that inter-member relations reproduce not only the long-standing North-South divide - albeit less marked than it was during the Fordist period – but also a stark difference between Western and Eastern European cities. This finding is in contrast with some previous research: for the case of Eurocities, Kübler and Piliutyte (2007) argue that more disadvantaged cities and those from recent member-states, unlike well-off European capitals, are more attracted by the possibility offered by inter-urban networks to take part in European projects.

A final observation on the geography of inter-member relations should be made on the concept of polycentrism. Transnational municipal networks are described as “polycentric”, insofar as decision-making rests with a plurality of centres (Bulkeley et al., 2003; Kern and Bulkeley, 2009). The decision-making polycentrism does not appear to match an equal distribution of the influence among network members. The presence of trend-setters

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<sup>14</sup> For example, some cities in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Poland, as well as Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Riga, Tallinn, Timisoara, Vilnius and Zagreb are full members of Eurocities. A few Eastern European cities are also members of Iclei Europe; additionally, Budapest and Tallinn are members of Polis.

mainly located in the old European backbone of economic development suggests that cities outside this area are struggling to position themselves on the European urban map. Drawing again a comparison between the geography of economic development and the location of the influential member-cities, then it can be argued that the networks do not reflect a “polycentric Europe”. From an economic perspective, this model indicates an urban system where inter-urban competition is “complemented by an element of cooperation and mutual help among regions and cities” – defined as “European grape” (Kunzmann and Wegener, 1991, p.291). Conversely, the findings seem to suggest that within SEUNs there are not several influential cities scattered across Europe. To some extent, the presence of trend-setters and followers suggests a multi-speed model of network membership, whereby a number of more economically and socially advanced - and hence more influential – cities are more tightly connected in collaborative relations, constituting the core of the urban Europe.

## **Conclusions**

In tune with previous research on the topic, this article has shown how the sharing of knowledge and experiences among cities is a crucial aspect of inter-urban networking. The main purpose for acquiring information from other European peers is to find inspiration on how to tackle urban problems, with the ultimate aim to achieve urban regeneration. Here, the urban sustainability discourse, with its emphasis on the quality of the urban space, has superseded the conceptualisation of cities as mere sites of production proper of industrialism.

The findings of the study reported in this article indicate that policy learning, fostered by knowledge sharing, leads to the mobility of practices through the emulation of successful urban models. The exchange of knowledge and experience is more intense between comparable places, which share commonalities in terms of socio-economic characteristics of

the territory and their vision for the future. This comparability aspect - which McCann (2011) defines “commensurability” - has always been a salient element of transnational municipalism. The latter rests on the idea underpinning “municipal connections” that all cities across Europe (and beyond) share common beliefs and norms: an example is the competition among localities to resemble the “ideal ‘modern’ city”, which spanned across the late years of 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the 1940s (Saunier, 2002, p.522). In a similar fashion, contemporary transnational municipalism promotes the new urban “archetype of the ‘modern city’”, where sustainability and innovation are crucial aspects (Mocca, 2017a, p. 694). In particular, the findings show that the exchange of policy knowledge in SEUNs is not equal and reciprocal, but is dominated by those cities that have been able to craft a new post-industrial identity. In this respect, the data hint at a European urban development path led – more or less intentionally - by northern-continental cities to which the more struggling peers in the peripheral areas seek to align. Therefore, this article has shown that “imitative urbanism” (Robinson, 2006) does not only play out in Global North-South partnerships - as suggested for instance by Bouteliger (2013) - but also shapes the urban development patterns within Europe.

It has to be noted that the small sample and the inclusion of European post-industrial second cities limits the generalisability of the research findings. Notwithstanding, the focus on a limited number of cases permitted to study in-depth the relational dynamics and spatial implications of policy learning within SEUNs. As such, this article has sought to contribute to the scholarship on policy mobility and transnational municipalism, by trying to disentangle the “messy, unmappable complexity of policy flows” (Robinson, 2011, p.1092).

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